Today, Icarus: On the persistence of André Bazin’s myth of total cinema

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Chapter II: The Photograph of Danger: A Shark in the Cinema

By way of introduction, I propose to take a closer look at one particularly outstanding critique relating to documentary authenticity, namely Bazin's discussion of Thor Heyerdahl’s documentary film Kon-Tiki (1950). Heyerdahl’s renowned exploratory expedition was set out as a counter-proof to established theories of migration: according to him, the people of Polynesia had travelled westwards on a raft from the coast of Peru, and as ultimate proof of this theory Heyerdahl accompanied his thesis with a real-life expedition, documented by film - a film that, in Bazin’s words, “does not exist:"

Kon-Tiki est le plus beau des films mais il n'existe pas! Comme des ruines dont quelques pierres émoussées suffisent à faire lever les architectures et les sculptures disparues, les images qu'on nous propose sont ce vestige d'une œuvre virtuelle dont on ose à peine rêver.

Because of the crew’s inexperience and the spatial restriction of the raft, the film lacked intriguing shots and the material itself was of poor quality. But rather than weakening the film, Kon-Tiki’s uninviting shooting conditions enhanced the documentary authenticity so dear to Bazin:

[...] ces rares images au milieu d’un flot de pellicule presque sans intérêt objectif sont comme des épaves inestimables et bouleversantes sur la houle monotone de l’océan. Elles ont la beauté des ruines, érodées par le temps, le vent et le soleil. C’est que leur délabrement n’est pas ressenti comme un manque, les immenses lacunes de ces films sont en réalité un plein, le plein de l’aventure humaine dont elle ne témoignent si pleinement que par leur vide.

In fact, Bazin’s preference for an authentic image over aesthetic perfection extends beyond the particular case of Kon-Tiki into his wide-ranging understanding of cinematic realism, more precisely, in what he termed “ontogenetic realism.”

Whereas he would name this procedure only in 1958, in conjoining the two opening essays to Qu’est-ce que le cinéma? as well as in his preface describing the first volume

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Ontologie et langage, the idea of an “ontogenetic realism”\(^3\) is already clearly formulated in “Ontologie de l’image photographique” (1945): ‘l’image peut être floue, déformée, décolorée, sans valeur documentaire, elle procède par sa genèse de l’ontologie du modèle: elle est le modèle.’\(^4\) Similarly, in defence of Kon-Tiki’s poor cinematography, Bazin ultimately argues for decay and dissemblance as a sign and proof of authenticity:

Car le film n’est pas constitué seulement par ce qu’on voit. Ses imperfections témoignent de son authenticité, les documents absents sont l’empreinte négative de l’aventure, son inscription en creux.\(^5\)

This negative imprint of adventure, which implies a presence without direct visibility, is put at work most clearly in Bazin’s description of the shark attack-scene (Fig. 1): ‘ce n’est pas tant la photographie du requin que celle du danger.’\(^6\) Ever since, simply filming a shark-attack, even disregarding the aggravating circumstances of Heyerdahl and his crew, has proven to be anything but easy.


However, Bazin’s encounter in September 1948 on the occasion of the Rencontres internationales de Genève with Adolphe Portman (1897-1982), who was zoology professor at the University of Basel, might revalue the biological foundations of this concept for Bazin. Portman’s research was invested in the physiological premature of man (man is “an animal born too early”), which echoes in Bazin’s general film historical orientation (“cinema not yet invented”). From this point of view, the biological resonances in the term “ontogeny” need not oppose the mechanism described by Joubert-Laurencin (cf. infra, 5.2.1 Debates on Contemporary Art: Bazin, Marcel and Portmann).

\(^4\) Bazin, “Ontologie,” p. 14

\(^5\) Bazin, “Le Cinéma et l’exploration,” p. 34

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 32
Indeed, while Steven Spielberg, hoping to achieve a higher degree of realism, decided to shoot *Jaws* (1975) on location rather than in the usual massive basins of Hollywood studios, it was his mechanical shark which disappointed him most, as it failed drastically in conveying the imminent danger of a real shark-attack (Fig. 2); in such cases, Spielberg nicknamed the shark “the great white turd.” Moreover, in the context of this discussion it is intriguing to note that precisely the shooting conditions on location severely aggravated and accentuated the shark’s artifactual qualities: it sank immediately when put to water at Martha's Vineyard, and the salty ocean water repeatedly damaged the material of the mechanical shark. For these reasons, Spielberg ended up filming with a subjective camera assuming the position of the shark so that most scenes were recorded without explicitly showing it, which brings us back full circle to Bazin’s argument concerning the shark-attack in *Kon-Tiki*.

The complexity of documentary authenticity thus crystallizes in the burden of shark attacks in the cinema. In a similar way, in a review of the underwater exploration film *Le Monde du silence* (Jacques-Yves Cousteau and Louis Malle, 1956) Bazin derives a fundamental principle of authenticity from the indispensable bond between the cinematographic image and reality:

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7 “Jaws: Trivia.” *The Internet Movie Database.* [Accessed 28/05/2014]  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073195/trivia?ref_=tt_trv_trv>
Ce que le film enregistre c’est la répétition d’événements qui ont dû ou qui ont pu, selon toute vraisemblance, se reproduire de la même façon en l’absence de toute caméra. Ce principe interdit naturellement les fantaisies du genre “lutte à mort avec un requin.” Non qu’à la limite l’événement soit inconcevable mais parce que sa répétition serait la négation du péril qui en fait justement le pathétique. Ou le requin est inoffensif et c’est une ignoble comédie, ou il est dangereux et l’opérateur qui continue de filmer est coupable de ne pas porter secours à une personne en danger. 8, vii

So Bazin’s argument of cinema as an art of the real manifests itself in the analysis of sharks throughout the history of cinema, and it formulates the fundamental question pertaining to documentary authenticity, namely: did the camera influence the event? Concerning sharks in cinema, the question then is not one of probability, but of authenticity.

Interestingly, Kon-Tiki’s shark scene has recently been given a second life, in which precisely those limitations that proved, for Bazin, the documentary authenticity of Kon-Tiki have been spectacularly disregarded: the 2012 feature film remake by Joachim Rønning and Espen Sandberg, also entitled Kon-Tiki. The film makes abundant use of helicopter shots, underwater filming, and the shark-attack scene in particular, is a remarkable display of over 500 instances of computer generated imagery and effect shots. The contemporary Kon-Tiki expedition therefore stands in stark opposition to the description by Bazin of the original Kon-Tiki documentary, when he writes:

Pas de travellings, naturellement, pas d’angles plongeants, à peine la possibilité de faire des plans d’ensemble du “navire” depuis un canot pneumatique balloté par les vagues. Enfin et surtout, si un événement important se produisait (une tempête par exemple), l’équipage avait autre chose à faire qu’à tourner. En sorte que nos amateurs ont visiblement gaspillé force bobines à filmer le perroquet fétique et les rations alimentaires de l’Intendance américaine, mais quand d’aventure une baleine se précipite sur le radeau, l’image est si brève qu’il faut la redoubler dix fois à la Truca pour qu’on ait le temps de l’apercevoir.9

In the context of Bazin’s 1952 critique, and more generally in light of his views on ontogenetic realism, the remake of the Kon-Tiki expedition, the shark-attack scene in particular, should thus be seen as a surprising take on the status of the image in today’s contemporary visual culture (Fig. 3-4). Rønning and Sandberg’s film, I argue, enters in a


9 Bazin, “Le Cinéma et l’exploration,” p. 32
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direct dialogue with cinematic realism, of which the re-enactment of the shark-attack scene is indeed an intriguing case, given the implications of Bazin’s critique outlined above. In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, commenting on the difficulty involved in “shooting” *Kon-Tiki*, Sandberg and Rønning state:

Rønning: To make a whale shark and other sharks, CGI needed to be at a certain level. Personally we had never seen sharks in movies that we felt were one hundred percent life-like.

Sandberg: The reason it worked so well in *Jaws* is because you basically never see the shark. We had to have it on deck and everything. So I think that was part of the reason it hadn’t been made before because it would have been too expensive.\(^{10}\)

Under no circumstance would Heyerdahl and his crew have been able, or indeed willing to shoot the shark attack scene, for instance, from below the water surface, neither did Spielberg or anyone else for that matter. Thus, while *Kon-Tiki* from 2012 in many aspects radically overturns Bazin’s notion of ontogenetic realism, it is most definitely an impressive exposé of the possibilities of CGI that produce the very visibility which Bazin considered inconceivable, provided that the shark is inoffensive or, in this case virtual: at most a dummy.\(^{11}\)


Although there are many examples from which to draw illustrating subjects that pose a serious threat to documentary authenticity, the filmic image of the shark stands out in this regard, and it is this subject that Bazin uses to illustrate his argument on documentary authenticity. Those who have seen *Jaws* are aware that shark films often build on explicit B-movie aesthetics, where the shark is clearly visible. Throughout film history, sharks in cinema have been “jumping the shark,” so to speak, and the act of filming a shark-attack, even if we disregard the difficult circumstances for Heyerdahl and his crew, has proven to be a cumbersome endeavour. Where Spielberg liberally employed the artifice of a rubbery looking mechanical shark in his attempt to depict danger, CGI-effects were put to use excessively during the shark attack-scene in *Kon-Tiki*’s recent remake from 2012. In this case, CGI radically overturns the logic of Bazin’s ontogeny-thesis: the visibility of the shark becomes proof of the inauthenticity of the image – proof, at least, that the shark was never filmed (and that the cameraman therefore did not fail in his duty to rescue). Evidently, the image of the shark in *Kon-Tiki* 2012 is nothing like the photograph of danger, of which Bazin spoke. And yet, to this day the very heart of the problem, a shark on film, remains the same. CGI thus appears to have brought the contemporary cinematographic image to the reverse side of the ontogeny-argument, where the result predominates over the authenticity derived from the photographic genesis of the image: the dummy comes as the culmination of a history of mechanical sharks in cinema.
2.1 The Paradox of Authenticity: Bazin’s Shark and Schrödinger’s Cat

The implications of Bazin’s analysis of the shark-attack scene in *Kon-Tiki* perfectly illustrate the way in which realism on screen necessitates that ‘il faudra toujours sacrifier quelque chose de la réalité à la réalité.’ In both Heyerdahl’s lived documentary as well as Spielberg’s feature film, the very properties of the image are sacrificed to enhance the authenticity of the attack. In this manner, the screen becomes a double-edged sword, as each gain in reality involves a loss in the image, and vice versa.

From this perspective, the analysis of the shark in *Kon-Tiki* appears to lean towards a similar observational theory as initiated by the Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger (1887-1961), who set out to challenge the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum indeterminacy, in particular their concept of the wave- or psi-function, which calculates the probability of objective reality. After Werner Heisenberg’s description in 1927 of the “uncertainty principle,” physical science acknowledged a radical shift in perspective, as it turned its back to physical determinism. Where classical mechanics is based on the assumption of scientific reproducibility, which assumes that if all conditions are meticulously recreated, repeated scientific experiments should produce the same results, quantum physics, on the contrary, is founded upon the unpredictable behaviour of particles on a quantum level, so that ‘chance must be elevated to the status of an essential feature of physical behaviour.’

Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle soon developed into the Copenhagen interpretation, which extends the principle from the infinitesimal level of quantum physics onto ‘the macroscopic objects of

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13 Quantum indeterminacy, also called the uncertainty principle, is the fundamental assertion in quantum physics that the state of a certain physical system cannot fully determine the actual observed values. Diverging from classical mechanics, the study of phenomena on a quantum level cannot predict or determine the behaviour of individual particles. Beyond being an apology for inaccurate measurement or miscalculations, quantum indeterminacy is an essential and necessary uncertainty in our understanding of reality.

sense experience,"¹⁵ based largely on probability for understanding physical reality. In order to demonstrate the absurdity of their particular calculated, almost statistical approach to indeterminacy, Schrödinger imagined the by now famed thought experiment of the cat-paradox, of which I cite here his full description:

At all events it [the psi-function] is an imagined entity that images the blurring of all variables at every moment just as clearly and faithfully as does the classical model its sharp numerical values. [...] But serious misgivings arise if one notices that the uncertainty affects macroscopically tangible and visible things, for which the term "blurring" seems simply wrong. [...] One can even set up ridiculous cases. A cat is penned up in a steel chamber, along with the following device (which must be secured against direct interference by the cat): in a Geiger counter there is a tiny bit of radioactive substance, so small, that perhaps in the course of the hour one of the two atoms decays, but also, with equal probability, perhaps none; if it happens, the counter tube discharges and through a relay releases a hammer which shatters a small flask of hydrocyanic acid. If one has left this entire system to itself for an hour, one would say that the cat still lives if meanwhile no atom has decayed. The psi-function of the entire system would express this by having in it the living and dead cat (pardon the expression) mixed or smeared out in equal parts.

It is typical of these cases that an indeterminacy originally restricted to the atomic domain becomes transformed into macroscopic indeterminacy, which can then be resolved by direct observation. That prevents us from so naively accepting as valid a "blurred model" for representing reality. In itself it would not embody anything unclear or contradictory. There is a difference between a shaky and out-of-focus photograph and a snapshot of clouds and fog banks.¹⁶

In the cat-paradox experiment, Schrödinger transfers quantitative probability, which he calls the "blurred model" of superimposing all possible variables (i.e. the cat has equal chance to being dead or alive, hence it is both), onto the macroscopic and qualitative level of an actual cat in a box, where merely opening the box reveals the cat to be either dead or alive. Though at first sight Schrödinger’s condemnation of the out-of-focus photograph appears to contradict Bazin’s views on ontogenetic realism, which favours the blurred photograph over the faithful drawing, their argumentations in fact run parallel. In face of the uniqueness of an irreversible event, irreproducible either as a scientific experiment or in the artificial


environment of a studio, both Bazin and Schrödinger condemn the inauthenticity involved in quantitative probability: death, Bazin argues, is ‘[…] l’instant qualitatif à l’état pur,’ and ‘la “réalité” ne doit naturellement être entendue quantitativement.’

Such an approach that engages with a statistical mind-set fits within a more general ‘epistemological break with traditional notions of determinism’ in the earlier days of cinema, which Mary Ann Doane analyses at length in a chapter on “Temporal Irreversibility and the Logic of Statistics” in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (2002): ‘classical cinema,’ she writes, ‘aligns itself with the logic of statistics as a way of measuring and hence mapping chance events, contingency.’ Like Schrödinger, Bazin appears to reject this probabilistic logic that informs classical cinema as ‘the exemplar of temporal irreversibility, as the most effective means of clarifying the idea of an “arrow of time”.’ As Doane points out, the connection between quantitative accumulation and modern technology can be found, for instance, in Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), as he writes that:

[...] to pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose “sense of the universal equality of things” has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics.

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18 Bazin, “Le Réalisme cinématographique,” p. 69


20 Ibid., p. 139

21 Ibid., p. 117

As I will argue in the following pages, Bazin’s view of authenticity in film provides a particular take on the concept of irreversibility (cf. infra, 2.3 Cinematic Specificity: “the eternal dead-again of cinema”), as it ties in with the idea of an arrow of time through his notion of “integral realism.” More specifically, it provides us with an innovative answer to Zeno’s infamous paradoxes, which Doane in another chapter considers constitutive of the emergence of cinematic time, and to which I will turn subsequently (cf. infra, 2.4 Integral Realism: Reality and Cinema “Ultimately Equal”).

22 Walter Benjamin (1936), cited in Ibid., p. 130
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From this perspective, then, mechanical reproduction, Doane argues, ‘robs the object of its uniqueness and permanence [as] technical reproduction reduces all things to a common denominator.’23 In a comparable manner,24 Bazin argues that repeating the event would efface its essence, especially if it involves imminent danger such as a death threat. But the paradox of authenticity does not stop there, I will argue, since it is only on screen that this qualitative moment can be repeated eternally, amounting to Bazin’s ironic adaptation of the medium essentialist notion of “cinematic specificity.”

23 Ibid.

24 On resonances of Benjamin in Bazin, see for instance Monica Dall’Asta’s “Beyond the Image in Benjamin and Bazin: The Aura of the Event.” (In: Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Aftermath. Eds. Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin. New York: Oxford University Press (2011): pp. 57-65), in which she suggests Bazin’s prohibition of montage to formulate an answer to Benjamin’s “Work of Art” essay. Especially relevant in the context of the “ontological equality” of events on screen, is her discussion of Jean Epstein’s notion of photogénie in relation to both Bazin and Benjamin’s views on montage in film (pp. 59-61), to which I will turn later on (cf. infra, 2.4.1 No moment suprême: Bazin Opposes Ellipsis (and Photogénie)).
2.2 Montage prohibited? CGI and the Dummy of Danger

In his famed essay “Montage interdit” from 1953-1957, Bazin generally rules out montage when it would mean the annihilation of danger. As I will maintain, his views on documentary authenticity and cinematic specificity directly relate to his notorious condemnation of cinematic montage, in which he argues that, rather than entirely dismissing montage as anti-cinematic, “[...] il est des cas où, loin de constituer l’essence du cinéma, le montage en est la négation.”\textsuperscript{25, xi} In this manner, “Montage interdit” is not a categorical dismissal of the cinematic possibilities montage; rather, his ban on editing shows itself to be an ironic rhetorical play on qualitative specificity within the context of his larger dismissal of medium specificity, of which the theories of montage were in Bazin’s days among the most essentialist.

In his deepening of what appears to be Bazin’s one and only aesthetic commandment, French film critic Serge Daney (1944-1992) indeed describes editing as a correlation of risk, in an essay from 1972 entitled “L’Écran du fantasme (Bazin et les bêtes):”

We can see that what justifies the prohibition of editing is […] the nature of what is being filmed, the status of the protagonists (in this case men and animals) who are forced to share the screen, sometimes at the risk of their lives. The ban on editing is a function of this risk.\textsuperscript{26}

Daney further develops the paradox of irreversibility on screen in qualitative terms, as it risks being effaced by quantitative repetition. The same principle, we have seen, guides the authenticity argument of an invisible shark on screen, thereby running the risk that the film itself ceases to exist: ‘Kon-Tiki est le plus beau des films mais il n’existe pas. […] les images qu’on nous propose sont le vestige d’une œuvre virtuelle dont on ose à peine rêver.’\textsuperscript{27, xii} And just as the photograph of the shark could be the negation of danger, so too can montage (not


\textsuperscript{27} Bazin, “Le Cinéma et l’exploration,” p. 31
always, but in specific cases) be the negation of cinema. But if the question of documentary authenticity involves minimizing the camera’s influence on the event, the inevitable consequence of this would be the effacement of cinema itself. Conversely, Bazin proposes, for instance, *Man of Aran* (Robert J. Flaherty, 1934), a fictional documentary of everyday struggles on the western coast of the Aran Islands, where at one point we clearly see a shark for an extended period of time, soothing right beneath the water surface (Fig. 5-6): in this case, “cinematographic splendour [*la splendeur photographique]*” rids the shark from its essential features. In the context of sharks, Bazin then introduces what he terms an “insoluble dilemma [*un insoluble dilemme]*” between reality and its abstraction on screen: what can the camera capture from the event without destroying its essence? But also: if cinema cannot be more than an extraction from reality, then why bother making films at all?

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Fig. 5-6 Composition of clear shots of a shark in *Man of Aran*

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28 Ibid., p. 32
2.3 Cinematic Specificity: “the eternal dead-again of cinema”

The fact that Bazin’s views on documentary authenticity articulate so clearly in the analysis of a shark-attack is no coincidence, since animals, preferably dangerous ones, are precisely those “ontological others” that ‘can nudge us to rethink his core cinematic vision,’29 and in other cases, Guinea pigs of which cinema demands the ultimate sacrifice for reality: death as the final and unrepeatable event proves, for Bazin as well as for Schrödinger, the singularity of the event. Such specificity of the event becomes for Bazin the death drive of cinema, which results in his oxymoronic statement of “cinematic specificity:”

Or la mort est un des rares événements, cher à Claude Mauriac, de spécificité cinématographique. Art du temps, le cinéma a le privilège exorbitant de le répéter. […] [L]e cinéma n’atteint ou ne construit son temps esthétique qu’à partir du temps vécu, de la “durée” bergsonienne, irréversible et qualitative pas essence. […] Je ne puis répéter un seul instant de ma vie, mais l’un quelconque de ces instants le cinéma peut le répéter indéfiniment devant moi. […] La mort est pour l’être le moment unique par excellence. C’est par rapport à lui que se définit rétroactivement le temps qualitatif de la vie. Il marque la frontière de la durée consciente et du temps objectif des choses. La mort n’est qu’un instant après un autre, mais c’est le dernier.30, xiii

Rather than engaging in the intended essentialist mind-set of Mauriac’s “cinematic specificity,” Angela Dalle Vacche suggests that Bazin instead was more affiliated with Gabriel Marcel’s notion of “ontological exigency,” from which she argues that ‘[i]t is in the margins of the unknown that photography and the cinema explore and expose in ways no other medium, craft, digital imaging, or art form can even begin to match.’31


30 Bazin, “Mort tous les après-midi,” p. 68


For a detailed analysis of Bazin’s affinity with Marcel on the cross-influence between cinema and other arts, cf. infra, 5.2.1 Debates on Contemporary Art: Bazin, Marcel and Portmann
In Bazin’s days, medium specificity was a commonly accepted way of thinking about the objective nature of cinema. However, this framework is fundamentally alien to his understanding of film history: even in his essay on photographic ontology, which has most commonly been associated with the notion of medium specificity, Bazin refrains from adopting such prescriptive framework.\(^{32}\) His explicit reference to Mauriac in this particular case therefore suggests that he uses this framework to his own advantage: rather than concerning himself primarily with the specificity of photography, a theory which would lead to a priori accepting the authenticity of any filmed event, he instead clearly valorises the specificity of reality. In so doing, he implicitly supports his argument of cinema as the art of reality, rather than that of the image or technology. Thus, by alluding to Mauriac’s essentialist view, Bazin here cleverly morphs an argument concerned with medium essentialism into his own valorisation of the specificity of the event and cinema’s fundamental capacity to repeat irreversibility: ‘Morts sans requiem, éternels re-morts du cinéma.’\(^{33, xiv}\) From this filmic specificity, which draws cinema to the point of its own annihilation, Daney develops the idea of a “trip switch” of cinema: ‘[…] Bazin indicates the exact spot where the cinema he would not dare dream of becomes a reality and then annuls itself, becomes itself the impossible. This is a limit that is not so distant, whose simple possibility valorises the most banal image: the risk of death for the cameraman, of impossibility for the film: “occupational hazards.”’\(^{34}\) As he writes, citing Bazin:

> Although the filmmaker sometimes risks death, it can also happen that he may film it without risk or even provoke it by means of his simple presence. The exorbitant power of the camera. You can die just to save face. This is what happened with Valentin, the birdman (in *Paris 1900*):
>
> ‘This is how it is in this prodigious bird man scene where the poor fool is obviously getting frightened and has finally realized that the bet was idiotic. But the camera is there to capture him for eternity, and he dare not disappoint its soulless eye. If there had been human witnesses, a wise cowardice would certainly have won out (Bazin, 1947).’\(^{35}\)

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\(^{32}\) Ibid.

\(^{33}\) Bazin, “Morts tous les après-midi,” p. 70

\(^{34}\) Daney, “The Screen of Fantasy,” p. 37

\(^{35}\) Ibid., p. 39
The death drive of cinema thus functions in two directions that either way involve a certain loss or gain in reality: either the cameraman risks his or her life, or the camera is itself responsible for causing a coward to jump to his death.\textsuperscript{36} Death then becomes the ultimate moment, fundamentally irreversible and irreproducible, when cinema shows its morbid specificity by means of a sacrificial death.

2.4 Integral Realism: Reality and Cinema “Ultimately Equal”

“If the prohibition of montage is first and foremost aimed at countering essentialist theories of film, and bearing in mind Bazin’s application of the existentialist maxim “existence precedes essence” in this context, then his assertion that the film “does not exist” is rather problematic, to say the least. In “Montage interdit,” however, Bazin offers a way out of this impossibility of film by introducing a “threshold of trickery” where the myth, which is cinema, both integrates and substitutes for reality:

[...] si ce que montre et signifie l’écran avait dû être vrai, effectivement réalisé devant la caméra, le film cesserait d’exister, car il cesserait du même coup d’être un mythe. C’est la frange de truquage, la marque de subterfuge nécessaire à la logique du récit qui permet à l’imaginaire, à la fois d’intégrer la réalité et de s’y substituer.”

This simultaneous integration of and substitution for reality should be taken quite seriously, as it provides a reformulation of “integral realism,” which is the guiding principle of the myth of total cinema. In what follows, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which Bazin overrides this insoluble dilemma between image and reality by seeing them in a Newtonian sense as “ultimately equal.” By analysing in Bazin’s writing as well as Daney’s interpretation of Bazin a series of mathematical and philosophical references, such as the ellipsis/ellipse, the asymptote and quantitative measurements versus qualitative leaps, I will argue that Bazin’s proposition for “integral realism” is to be understood, not in the sense of a complete substitution or total illusion of reality, but rather in mathematical terms as an integral calculus: an approximation and measure of reality.


38 Bazin, “Montage interdit,” pp. 55-56
2.4.1 No moment suprême: Bazin Opposes Ellipsis (and Photogénie)

Bazin’s solution for the dilemma between image and reality lies in his firm acknowledgement of the ontological equality of instants, in reality as well as on screen. This view, both canonical and highly original, comes to the foreground in Bazin’s praise of Italian neo-realism, which he considered a “great post-war cinematographic event [un grand événement cinématographique d’après guerre],” because it provided a victorious new solution to aesthetic conflicts in its creation of a new kind of image, i.e. the image-fait:

 [...] fragment de réalité brute, en lui-même multiple et équivoque, dont le “sens” se dégage seulement a posteriori grâce à d'autres “faits” entre lesquels l'esprit établit des rapports. Sans doute le metteur en scène a bien choisi ces “faits,” mais en respectant leur intégrité de “fait.” [...] Mais la nature de "l'image-fait" n'est pas seulement d'entretenir avec d'autres "images-faits" des rapports inventés par l'esprit. Ce sont là en quelque sorte les propriétés centrifuges de l'image, celles qui permettent de constituer le récit. Considérée en elle-même, chaque image n'étant qu'un fragment de réalité antérieur au sens, toute la surface de l'écran doit présenter une égale densité concrète.  

The premise of ontological equality of instants prevents him from adopting theories of film that claim cinema to be either more or less than reality. As I will argue, within the context of medium specificity, Bazin’s notion of image-fait opposes the former view as crystallized in the silent film theorist Jean Epstein’s (1897-1953) concept of photogénie, while the latter solidifies in the critic and filmmaker Roger Leenhardt’s (1903-1985) assertion of cinema as the art of ellipsis. In both cases, Bazin’s notion of integral realism supports the existentialist rather than essentialist view on film.

Bazin’s implicit criticism of unequal treatments of moments in the context of medium essentialism becomes most apparent in a passage in Daney’s reading of the prohibition of montage, in which he concerns himself with a “way out” of this trip switch of an impossible cinema:

In “classic” cinema, transformation as the result of a quantitative accumulation without a qualitative leap, as a new state always given but never produced, is resolved or rather it does not get resolved.

- Either there is no transformation


40 Ibid., pp. 79-80
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- Or it occurs as a teleological coup.

[…] Representation is no longer the condition for a good exfoliation of the story but a sort of travesty that can say nothing about the nature of things, about their heterogeneity or the laws of their mutations.\(^{41}\)

Daney conceives classical representation in cinema as a travesty, a distorted reproduction which effaces the true nature of the event, and stresses in a remarkably Kierkegaardian fashion\(^{42}\) the importance of a “qualitative leap” over “quantitative accumulation;” that which makes something happen, is the leap from possibility into actuality. Beyond the implicit references to statistics, as seen previously with Benjamin, and accordingly the outspoken preference of the qualitative instant over quantitative probability, which supports Bazin’s authenticity-argument, Daney here extracts a twofold criticism that is contained in Bazin’s ironic affirmation of cinematic specificity. Essentially, both options relate to a different understanding of cinematic specificity, either viewing film as an abstract (option 1) or a surplus (option 2) of reality. In order to set the ground for a novel understanding of “integral realism,” I will discuss both these points as crystallized in terms of the ellipsis and photogénie respectively, against which Bazin then opposes the “image-fait.”

Daney’s first point of criticism in classical narration, namely that nothing ever happens, resonates with the age-old philosophical paradox of motion stipulated by the pre-Socratic philosopher Zeno of Elea (490-430 BC), who derived from an infinitesimal division of distance that motion itself is impossible: Achilles will never surpass the tortoise and the arrow is in fact motionless. In The Emergence of Cinematic Time, Doane argues that ‘Zeno’s fallacy finds its technological embodiment in the cinema - in its spatialization of time, its

\(^{41}\) Daney, “The Screen of Fantasy,” pp. 39-40

\(^{42}\) In his Concluding Unscientific Postscript (1846), Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard maintains that transformation from one state to another happens only by means of a qualitative leap, and that those two states cannot exist simultaneously. The qualitative leap of faith relates to Kierkegaard’s view on the accidental nature of historical events, where possibility turns into actuality: ‘The whole point of the historical, for Kierkegaard, is that it constitutes the realm of "becoming" that makes intelligible the movement from possibility to actuality, a movement that remains impossible within the realm of necessity.’ (see: Michelson, G. E. “Lessing, Kierkegaard, and the ‘Ugly Ditch:’ A Reexamination.” The Journal of Religion, Vol. 59, No. 3 (July 1979): p. 330). Bazin, from his side, indeed implicitly takes on this dynamic in his discussion of cinematic montage: ‘[…] on pourra remarquer à fort juste titre que si Ballon Rouge ne doit rien essentiellement au montage, il y recourt accidentellement [original emphasis]’ (Bazin, “Montage interdit,” p. 55).
investment in the reality of instants. Doane posits two main interpretations of the paradox in relation to film theory: from his side, Henri Bergson, phenomenologist philosopher of duration, upheld that ‘movement slips through the interval’ and that therefore cinema can only give an illusion of movement, while Epstein, who dispersedly references Zeno’s paradox in his writing, argues altogether that cinema ultimately shows Zeno’s false reasoning to be accurate: a succession of still images creates movement through flickering light. In this manner, Epstein solves what he calls the “insoluble problem [le problème insoluble],” the “irreconcilable contradiction [la contradiction inconciliable],” which Bergson upholds, by asserting that continuity and discontinuity, movement and interruption, are not incompatible, but rather ‘deux modes d’irréalité facilement interchangeables.’

In his quest for the essence of cinema, which he saw crystallized in the close-up as “the soul of cinema [l’âme du cinéma],” Epstein radically sought for a surplus of reality on screen, which he conceptualized in his notion of photogénie:

J’appellerai photogénique tout aspect des choses, des êtres et des âmes qui accroît sa qualité morale par la reproduction cinématographique. Et tout aspect qui n’est pas majoré par la reproduction cinématographique n’est pas photogénique, ne fait pas partie de l’art cinématographique.

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43 Doane, Cinematic Time, p. 174

44 Ibid.


46 Epstein, “Intelligence d’une machine.” p. 281


Cinema Is the Art of Reality

Epstein’s *photogénie* could not be further removed from Bazin’s *image-fait*; in fact, it appears to me as though Bazin developed his argument with Epstein’s film theory in the back of his mind. In an analysis of *Paisà* (Roberto Rossellini, 1946), Bazin indeed opposes the *image-fait* to the shot and the close-up, in which Epstein had found the essence of film:

> L’unité du récit cinématographique dans *Paisà* n’est pas le “plan,” point de vue abstrait sur la réalité, mais le “fait.” […] Dans *Paisà* (et je rappelle que j’entends par là, à des degrés divers, la plupart des films italiens), le gros plan du bouton de porte serait remplacé par “l’image-fait” d’une porte dont toutes les caractéristiques concrètes seraient également apparentes. 49, xxii

Bazin’s dissatisfaction with the close-up as a tool in cinematographic narrative as well as Epstein’s essentialist notion of *photogénie* reflects Daney’s second point of criticism, the “teleological coup:” an unequal organization of events that cannot convey the concrete density of reality on screen.

> But the teleological critique in Daney’s phrasing suggests yet another, intrinsically related approach to film which Bazin appears to oppose, namely that in the process of abstraction, cinema itself “slips through the interval.” Following Leenhardt, who shared many ideas on realism with Bazin, 50 this interplay, which borders on the inexistence of cinema itself, is often referred to as the “elliptical” nature of film:

> When Leenhardt claims that the primary figure of cinema is the ellipsis not the metaphor, he is insisting that cinema is not a symbol system substituting one set of signs for another (as classic film aesthetics believed), but an always partial view of something significant that tries to appear through it. 51

In his views on documentary authenticity epitomized by the shark attack, Bazin comes close to affirming Leenhardt’s claims, and indeed Andrew argues that ‘[ellipsis] stands as the key technique necessary for the very operation of the documentaire, that genre of film he

49 Bazin, “Le Réalisme cinématographique,” pp. 79-80

50 Bazin and Leenhardt both uphold a counter-determinist view on film history following the advent of the talking film, which would become so prevalent both in Bazin’s proclamation of realism and his prohibition of montage. As Andrew writes in “A Film Aesthetic to Discover” (2007), ‘For both men, the existence of sound changed the essence of cinema [original emphasis]’ (Andrew, Dudley. “A Film Aesthetic to Discover.” *Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2-3 (2007): p. 57).

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[Leenhardt] was proud to practice.52 But while Andrew stresses the similarities between their assertions of “primordial realism,”53, (xxii) he nuances this connection when it comes to the notion of the ellipsis and argues that Bazin understands it differently.

[I]t is time that Bazin, following Bergson, treats as pre-existent, time that extends before and after the spatial designs that humans construct. His feel for the integrity of time explains Bazin’s hesitancy about ellipsis […]. Ellipsis does violence to the continuity of nature that the camera respects in its “take.” […] On the one hand, ellipsis derives from the condition that keeps us from knowing everything; on the other, ellipsis organizes experience to suit our needs and projects; writers and filmmakers deploy it systematically for their “plots” as they pare away what they deem inessential. Ellipsis is the temporal equivalent of framing. And framing, Bazin asserts, can only be provisional in the cinema, a medium sensitive like no other to what lies beyond the edges of the screen in the infinite and unknowable volume (and continuity) of space-time.54

Here, the narrative abstraction in ellipsis is dismissed as a dramatization of the proportional analysis of reality, i.e. the close-up; again, this comes down to Bazin’s notion of image-fait which he describes as including ‘les propriétés centrifuges de l’image, celles qui permettent de constituer le récit.’55, xxiv By evoking cinema’s “centrifugal properties,” a recurring reference to Newtonian physics in Bazin which I will discuss at length later on (cf. infra, 6.1 Gravity and Buoyancy), Bazin again implicitly rejects Epstein’s essentialist mind-set as it rejected not only the universal equality of moments (photogénie) but also the fundamental laws of nature which cinema, according to Epstein, destroys:

La non-contradiction cesse de valoir comme critère de vérité. La flèche de Zénon, qui se déplace immobile, ne nous étonne plus. Tout être cumule mouvement et repos,

52 Andrew, “A Film Aesthetic to Discover,” p. 58

53 Ibid., p. 59

On Leenhardt’s notion of “primordial realism,” see also Joubert-Laurencin, Le Sommeil paradoxal, pp. 30-32. While Joubert-Laurencin maintains that ‘[…] Bazin transfèrera complètement ce qui est encore, chez Leenhardt, une description stylistique fondée sur l’analogie littéraire, du côté de la définition théorique de machinisme cinématographique’ (p. 31), I hope to demonstrate that Bazin radically distances himself from Leenhardt’s literary trope, and instead seeks in natural sciences, in particular the work of Isaac Newton, a proper framework for his argument of cinema as the art of reality.


55 Bazin, “Le Réalisme cinématographique,” p. 80
Unlike Epstein’s approach, which stresses the difference between cinema and reality, Bazin’s entire ontological project, his view of cinema as the art of reality, is firmly embedded in an acknowledgement of its off-screen origins, and reaffirms rather than rejects the pascalian “double infinity,” which views the universe as ‘[…] an infinite sphere, the centre of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere.’\textsuperscript{57} In this manner, Bazin’s rejection of both \textit{photogénie} and ellipsis gives way to his centrifugal understanding of \textit{l’image-fait}. Accordingly, as I will demonstrate now, Bazin’s notion of “integral realism” adheres to the laws of nature, and occasionally borrows from the calculus, as it was stipulated by Isaac Newton in Lemma II of his ground-breaking mathematical work, the \textit{Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica} (1687).\textsuperscript{58}

2.4.2 Bazin on Umberto D: Reformulating the Pregnant Instant

In order to fully grasp Daney’s criticism in the context of the discussion on montage and cinematic specificity, it is important to recognize in it the subtle references to parts of the essay on \textit{Umberto D} (Vittorio De Sica, 1952), often considered the purest expression of Italian neo-realism. In his analysis, Bazin praises Cesare Zavattini’s scenario for following


\textsuperscript{58} Though Newton had already started developing the calculus in \textit{Methods of Fluxions} (1671), it remains historically unclear whether Newton ultimately was its sole and independent inventor, or whether the final and complete publication of his methods in 1704 had been circumstantially influenced by Gottfried Leibniz, who had started working on a similar method in 1674 which he then published before Newton’s completed work on the calculus. Essentially, this quarrel is irrelevant for the current debate on integral realism, but since Bazin also points at Newtonian physics when he declares the screen as centrifugal and fundamentally opposed to the centripetal frame of painting, it is fair to assume that here, too, Bazin finds in Newton a fitting framework to develop his views on film.
precisely the opposite of ellipsis, which he denounces as a ‘conclusion pathétique d’un enchaînément dramatique d’événement:’ the “teleological coup” in Daney’s formulation. He puts this in plain words:

Le cinéma se fait ici tout le contraire de cet “art de l’ellipse” auquel on se plaît trop facilement à le croire voué. L’ellipse est un processus de récit logique et donc abstrait, elle suppose l’analyse et le choix, elle organise les faits selon le sens dramatique auquel ils doivent se soumettre.

Bazin here radically rejects Leenhardt’s elliptical approach to a narrative structure: this would imply a considerate selection of events, in which seemingly irrelevant or meaningless moments are eliminated to emphasize others that weigh more on the course of events. Instead, I will argue, Bazin uses the double meaning of l’ellipse in French, both referring to the stylistic figure as well as the geometrical concept of the conic section, to make a subtle but consequential change of paradigm from linguistics to analytical mathematics. As Andrew already suggested, in its temporal abstraction the stylistic figure of an ellipsis, the cut, in some way relates to that “infinite and unknowable volume” of the three-dimensional volume, by which Bergson conceives his famed spatialization of lived time in Matter and Memory (1896). Ultimately, the discussion of montage, then, brings us to the heart of the insoluble dilemma between continuous reality and its abstraction; a dilemma that Bergson maintains, cinema is less, and Epstein dissolves, cinema is more.

From his side, Bazin answers to the dilemma without having to reject neither reality nor the image, by means of a method that, to use Bazin’s formulation, allows ‘à la fois d’intégrer la réalité et de s’y substituer. The bridge he builds, I argue, between image and reality is essentially similar to the one Newton lays between the continuous curve and its infinite approximation in discrete units, which he establishes in the fundamental theorem of

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60 Bazin, “Umberto D,” p. 334


62 Bazin, “Montage interdit,” p. 56
the calculus. Newton originally developed the calculus as a method to enable calculating a curvilinear volume by dividing it into discrete, measurable units (Fig. 7), and in so doing he provided an ingenious countermand to the age-old paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. Lemma II of his Principia explains the basic reasoning supporting the first theorem of integral calculus:

If any figure AacE, comprehended by the straight lines Aa and AE and the curve acE, any number of parallelograms [...] are inscribed upon equal bases [...] if then the width of these parallelograms is diminished, and their number increased indefinitely, I can say that the ultimate ratios which the inscribed figure AKbLcMdD, the circumscribed figure AalbmcndoE, the curvilinear figure AabcdE have to one another are ratios of equality. [...] [T]he inscribed figure and circumscribed figure and, all the more, the intermediate curvilinear figure become ultimately equal to each other.63

Fig. 7 Newton’s calculus, “ultimately equal”

By dividing the curvilinear space into a number of parallelograms, and the more this number reaches infinity, the sum of these discrete units will ultimately equal the space enclosed by a continuous curve. Similarly, I will argue, Bazin’s notion of “integral realism,” as put forth in his myth of total cinema, postulates that cinema can be ultimately equal to reality; the ever-increasing frame-rates in contemporary film, even the perfecting resolutions of digital cinema transferred into a thickening pixelation, can be said to proceed from this Newtonian logic, which Bazin is the first to apply to film in his praise of Italian neo-realism.

In the essay on Umberto D specifically, Bazin takes up the Newtonian framework as he sees the narrative development alongside reality as a succession of “concrete instances” which are all “ontologically equal:”

Si, prenant quelque hauteur sur l’histoire, on y peut encore distinguer une géographie dramatique, une évolution générale des personnages, une certaine convergence des événements, ce n’est qu’a posteriori. Mais l’unité de récit du film n’est pas l’épisode,

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l’événement, le coup de théâtre, le caractère des protagonistes, elle est la succession des instants concrets de la vie, dont aucun ne peut être dit plus important que l’autre: leur égalité ontologique détruisant à son principe même la catégorie dramatique [my emphasis].  

He further develops the implicit interest in the calculus most clearly in his remarkable analysis of the wake-up scene in Umberto D:

[...] De Sica et Zavattini cherchent au contraire à diviser l’événement en événements plus petits encore, jusqu’à la limite de notre sensibilité à la durée. Ainsi, l’unité-événement dans un film classique serait le “lever de la bonne:” deux ou trois plans brefs suffiraient à la signifier. A cette unité de récit, De Sica substitue une suite d’événements plus petits: le réveil, la traversée du couloir, l’inondation des fourmis, etc. Mais observons encore l’un d’eux. Le fait de moudre le café, nous le voyons se diviser à son tour en une série de moments autonomes comme par exemple la fermeture de la porte du bout du pied tendu. La caméra suivant, en se rapprochant, le mouvement de la jambe, c’est le tâtonnement des orteils contre le bois qui devient finalement l’objet de l’image. 

If one were to follow either the elliptical or photogenic logic, perhaps a close-up of Maria’s hand on her belly might have sufficed, but instead the scene develops through a series of both temporally and spatially infinitesimal units: from the bedroom, through the hallway, into the kitchen, the matches, the ants and the water, the chair, the door, her foot, her toe (Fig. 8-13).

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64 Bazin, “Umberto D,” p. 333

65 Ibid.
By now we know of Maria’s pregnancy, and yet everything appears to follow her everyday routine. This idea is reinforced when Maria first tells Umberto D. of her secret:

*Maria:* Have you seen all the ants? Mr. Umberto, can you see anything?

*Umberto D.:* No, nothing.

*M.:* You can, a little. Did you know I’m pregnant?

*U.D.:* My god! And you just say it like that?

*M.:* How do you want me to say it?
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The revelation of Maria’s pregnancy becomes no more than the ants on the wall, which are, by the same token, of no lesser importance than the heavy memory of wartime. In his analysis of this sequence, Jean-François Chevrier points out that during WWII, Zavattini had compared the overwhelming sight of war spreading with an ant-infested kitchen: ‘War seems more formidable when you aren’t in the middle of one. Ants have overrun a wall in the kitchen; they march along in a way that reveals their certainty that I won’t discover their nest [...].’66 While Chevrier sees the close-up of the ants in the sink as relating to Epstein’s *photogénie*, I believe that, given the explicit references to limits and infinities in Bazin’s analysis, De Sica’s usage of close-ups is better served by the notion of *image-fait*, which opposes Epstein’s unequal treatment of moments as well as his rejection of the double infinity.

Just as death on screen, which is ‘qu’un instant après un autre,’ best illustrates Bazin’s notion of cinematic specificity because ‘c’est le dernier,’67.xxxi so too does its opposite, pregnancy, follow the rule of ontological equality. In this manner, the essay on *Umberto D* offers itself as an original take on what Jacques Aumont, following German philosopher and art critic Gotthold Lessing, discusses in terms of a “pregnant instant:”

> Le peintre, dont les moyens sont déployés dans l’espace, n’a pas besoin de s’occuper du temps, mais du choix d’un instant, du prélèvement habile, à l’intérieur de l’événement qu’il veut représenter, de l’instant meilleur, le plus significatif, le plus typique, le plus pregnant (n’oublions pas que “prégnant” veut dire “gros;” ce n’est pas pour rien qu’en anglais, “pregnancy,” “c’est la grossesse”).68,xxxii

The “pregnant instant” in art history stands precisely for the prevalence of one moment over any other; we can see clearly that the photogenic moment would appear too centripetal and painterly for Bazin. Moreover, Aumont remarks that this instant ‘n’existe pas dans le réel,’69.xxxiii when he describes it, following a rather familiar train of thought, as an oxymoron: ‘On ne peut marier l’instantanéité et la prégnance, l’authenticité de l’événement et sa charge

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67 Bazin, “Mort tous les après-midi,” p. 68


69 Ibid., p. 76
signifiante, qu’au prix d’une tricherie.  

Similarly, Bazin takes precisely the scene from Umberto D that reveals the pregnancy as a challenge to the conventional “unité-événement” of classical narration.

This is, I would argue, an important point in Bazin’s view on cinema and its relation to reality: because, of course, pregnancy, like death, is itself a life-changing event, but mostly because, unlike the finality of death, it announces a beginning, the analysis of Umberto D ultimately makes a strong case for the existence of film, conform to “the laws of mutations” that frame Daney’s reading of Bazin. In this manner, Bazin understood Italian post-war cinema to be a new realism, in which ‘la nécessité du récit est plus biologique que dramatique. Il bourgeonne et pousse avec la vraisemblance et la liberté de la vie.’

2.4.3 The Asymptote of Reality: Reality ≃ Cinema

At the end of his essay on Umberto D, Bazin himself solidifies the implied mathematical mind-set, as he introduces almost conjecturally his oft-cited suggestion of cinema as the asymptote of reality:

Il s’agit sans doute pour De Sica et Zavattini de faire du cinéma l’asymptote de la réalité. Mais pour qu’à la limite ce soit la vie elle-même qui se mue en spectacle, pour qu’elle soit enfin, dans ce pur miroir, donnée à voir comme poésie. Telle qu’en elle-même, enfin, le cinéma la change.

In analytic geometry, an asymptote is a straight line to which a curve tends at infinity, but which it never crosses. From this point of view, an elliptical figure in fact has no asymptote, so when Bazin then proposes to consider cinema as the asymptote of reality, the distance he takes from Leenhardt’s literary trope is rather radical. Bazin is clear in assigning to cinema the role of the asymptote, the straight line, which implies, following the mathematical logic, that it is reality which ultimately tends to cinema and that therefore, such as into itself, finally, cinema changes reality.

70 Ibid.
71 Bazin, “Le Réalisme cinématographique,” p. 74
72 Bazin, “Umberto D,” p. 335
The enigmatic closing line to this article is one of many bazinian reformulations, this one taken from the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Le Tombeau d’Edgar Allan Poe* (1877), which he repeats about eleven times throughout his writing: ‘Tel qu’en lui-même enfin l’éternité le change.’ In this specific instance, Bazin reuses the phrase to conclude a discussion on narrative progression without teleological coup, in which cinema shows reality as poetic. In an essay entitled “William Wyler, ou le janséniste de la mise en scène,” Bazin repeats the poetic potential of integral realism:

Il est du “cinéma” comme de la poésie. C’est folie que de l’imaginer comme un élément isolé qu’on pourrait recueillir sur une lamelle de gélatine et projeter sur l’écran au travers d’un appareil grossissant. […] Le cinéma n’est pas je ne sais quelle matière indépendante dont il faudrait à tout prix isoler les cristaux. Il est bien plutôt un état esthétique de la matière.  

It is not coincidental, then, that in the essay on Wyler, Bazin praises what he calls a “realist ethics” as a style without style75, (xxxviii) against the mannerist style of others (Capra, Ford, Lang). Bazin here, again, finds a fitting comparison with mathematics, as he concludes that ‘[l]a pureté ou mieux, à mon sens, le “coefficient” cinématographique d’un film doit être calculé sur l’efficacité du découpage.’ From this poetic potential, Joubert-Laurencin reads Bazin’s reformulation as recalling his ontological foundation of film as the “mummy complex:”

Quand on se remémore que pour Bazin, dans son article princeps, “le cinéma est la momie du changement”, il devient évident que la formule tient lieu ici de théorie: ne rien changer (au monde d’avant) pour tout changer (faire un film = changer le

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73 See Joubert-Laurencin’s analysis of this precise phrase: *Le Sommeil paradoxal*, pp. 153-158

74 Bazin, “William Wyler,” p. 172

75 Bazin, “William Wyler,” p. 150: ‘Le seul moyen d’imiter Wyler serait d’épouser cette sorte d’éthique de la mise en scène […] Wyler ne peut avoir d’imitateurs, mais seulement des disciples.’

76 By supporting a certain anti-mannerist aesthetics, Bazin here indirectly aligns himself with the Jansenists of Port-Royal (and he does this obviously in the title of his essay), a Christian theological mouvement that upheld original sin and divine grace and with which Pascal was associated. On Pascal and mannerism, see Tony Gheeraert. “Pascal et les reines de village: baroque et maniérisme à Port-Royal.” *Études épistémè*, No. 9 (2006): pp. 285-305

77 Bazin, “William Wyler,” p. 67
Moreover, upon closer examination, the line borrowed from Mallarmé summarizes the mathematical metaphors by which Bazin conceives the reality versus image dilemma: cinema takes the place of eternity or infinity - the asymptote, which continuous reality (Bergsonian durée), taking the place of the poet, approaches.

As a tentative answer to the insoluble dilemma between image and reality, embedded in Bazin’s reformulation of cinematic specificity, James Tweedie understands the asymptote-analogy to mean that cinema “brackets off” the flux of reality, and links it to ‘the foundational premise of [Alain] Badiou’s system of thought [based on] modernity’s “laicization” of the infinite.’

He writes:

Film can enclose that infinite expanse momentarily in a frame whose closest physical analogies he saw as he window and the mirror - Bazin cycles through these familiar comparisons, seemingly unsatisfied with all of them - but whose closest conceptual analog may be the provisional brackets of a mathematical set formed under specific conditions.

Yet, Tweedie appears to turn the analogy around, seems to view reality as the asymptote and consequently rids cinema of its transformative power: reality turns into spectacle. Instead, as I have established, with concepts such as the asymptote, integration and substitution Bazin pushes the mathematical analogy beyond the contingency of set theory, against the backdrop of infinity and eternity: [rather than [...]]. Rather than initiating a laicization of infinity, then, Bazin’s integral realism, like Newton’s calculus, does not solve the dilemma between image and reality; it in fact maintains this difference as insoluble and follows, as I will propose subsequently, a pascalian reasoning that wagers eternity against finitude.

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78 Joubert-Laurencin, Le Sommeil paradoxal, p. 49


80 Ibid., p. 280
2.5 Bazin’s Wager

On numerous occasions, Bazin adheres to a paradigm of choice, as his views on cinematic realism appear to derive from the conviction that “one cannot have both,” for instance, authenticity and figuration: Schrödinger’s cat cannot be both dead and alive. In this manner, his discussion of sharks on screen is built around a certain pragmatism, where a gain in reality implies the loss of its qualities of resemblance. As such, the hesitating between the real shark and a substitute dummy in the film history of sharks perfectly lends itself to the “I know, but all the same” paradigm, around which Daney reads Bazin’s prohibition of montage:

Bazin […] always oscillated between “I know it” and “but all the same.” At times, he clearly sees the realization of cinema’s essence – aided by technique – in its move toward greater and greater realism: this is his famous “gain in reality.” At other times, when he is reader to acknowledge his own fantasy, he points out that for every gain in reality there is a corresponding “loss of reality” in which abstraction insidiously returns.81

Daney extracts on the one hand a “risk function,” i.e. the probable cost associated with greater realism, and on the other hand an expected value, a hoped-for gain which is worth the cost associated with it. It is no coincidence that Daney constructs the realist argument in terms of a wager. In fact, this paradigm of loss and gain pervades Bazin’s thought process to such an extent that one could conceive his work on documentary authenticity, cinematic specificity and montage altogether as a realist wager. For instance, the wager paradigm clearly guides the reversed correlation Daney draws between editing and death, which we have seen prefigured in Bazin’s analysis of Reichelt’s fatal jump off the Eiffel tower: an “idiotic bet” with the camera that would capture his finitude “for eternity,” but unfortunately not for life.

In his Pensées, to which Bazin makes frequent reference either explicitly or implicitly, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), French philosopher, physician, inventor and mathematician, draws out his renowned wager over the existence of God, which would in combination with his mathematical work be seen to have touched upon the foundations of the

81 Daney, “Screen of Fantasy,” p. 34
calculus and prefigure mathematical probability theory. Pascal first stresses the necessity of the wager, and then considers reason alone as unfit to solve the dilemma of the existence of God:

"God is, or He is not." But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can do neither the one thing nor the other; according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions. [...] Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked.

You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. This is one point settled. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is. [...] Here is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of gain against a finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite. It is all divided; wherever the infinite is and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against that of gain, there is no time to hesitate, you must give all. And thus, when one is forced to play, he must renounce reason to preserve his life, rather than risk it for infinite gain, as likely to happen as the loss of nothingness.\(^82\)

Possibly the most well-known and pronounced account of Pascal’s wager on screen is Eric Rohmer’s *Ma nuit chez Maud* (1969), which draws clear parallels between Pascal’s wager and its mathematical implications as related to probability theory. Jean-Louis (Jean-Louis Trintignant), an engineer and practicing Catholic with a passion for maths and probability theory, walks into a bookshop and, after skimming through a new publication on probability, stumbles upon the *Pensées*. Later on, he reconnects with his old college friend Vidal, an atheist Marxist and philosophy professor at the local university, and their conversation sets the ground for the further development of the narrative:

- *Jean-Louis*: Are you interested in mathematics?

- *Vidal*: It’s increasingly important for a philosopher. In linguistics, for example. But even basic things. Pascal’s arithmetical triangle is connected to his wager. That’s what makes Pascal so amazingly modern. Mathematician and philosopher are one.

- *J.-L.*: Good old Pascal.

\(^{82}\) Pascal, *Pensées*, pp. 66-67
- \( V.\): Are you surprised?

- \( J.-L.\): Funny you mention him, I’m just rereading him at the moment. [...] I’m very disappointed. [...] I feel I know him almost by heart, and yet he tells me nothing. I find it all so empty. I’m a Catholic, or at least I try to be, but he doesn’t fit in my notion of Catholicism. It’s exactly because I’m a Christian that his austerity offends me. If that’s what Christianity is about, then I’m atheist. Are you still Marxist?

- \( V.\): Absolutely. For a communist, Pascal’s wager is very relevant today. Personally, I very much doubt that history has any meaning. Yet I wager that it has, so I’m in a Pascalian situation. Hypothesis A: Society and politics are meaningless. Hypothesis B: History has meaning. I’m not at all sure B is more likely to be true than A. More likely the reverse. Let’s even suppose B has a 10 percent chance of being true, and A has 80 percent. Nevertheless... I have no choice but to opt for B, because only the hypothesis that history has meaning allows me to go on living. Suppose I bet on A, and B was true, despite the lesser odds. I’d have thrown away my life. So I must choose B to justify my life and actions. There’s an 80 percent chance I’m wrong, but that doesn’t matter.

- \( J.-L.\): Mathematical hope. Potential gain divided by probability. With your hypothesis B, though the probability is slight, the possible gain is infinite. in your case, a meaning to life. In Pascal’s, eternal salvation.

- \( V.\): It was Gorky, Lenin or maybe Mayakovsky who said about the Russian revolution that the situation forced them to choose the one chance in a thousand. Because hope became infinitely greater if you took that chance than if you didn’t take it.

The entire film develops further against the background of Pascal’s famous wager over the existence of God. On Christmas Eve, Jean-Louis takes Vidal along to the evening mass, after which they join Maud, a single mother and Vidal’s secret love interest, at her place for a drink. Because of the winter weather outside, Jean-Louis stays the night at Maud’s (Fig. 14). As part of Rohmer’s Six Moral Tales, *Ma nuit chez Maud* covers Pascal’s wager from the perspective of moral conduct, precisely that which one risks losing in case God does not exist. In the bookstore, Jean-Louis almost hastily leafs through the *Pensées* and pauses attentively on the final passage of the wager (Fig. 15):

Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness. — "But this is what I am afraid of." — And why? What have you to lose? But to show you that this
leads you there, it is this which will lessen the passions, which are your stumbling blocks.  

Throughout the film, though he initially rejects Pascal’s austerity, this idea of “acting as if” becomes Jean-Louis’ primary guidance. He religiously attends church on Sundays (he “smells of holy water,” according to Maud), but openly dismisses Pascal’s austerity: he also loves the Chanturgue wine, to which Pascal would have remained insensitive. And so Ma nuit chez Maud develops as Jean-Louis struggles to find the correct behaviour that matches his convictions (or vice versa?). What goes for Jean-Louis the character counts for the actor as well, whose moral scruples regarding the role of a Catholic delayed the shooting with three years:  

Catholicism isn’t a particular concern of mine and that made me say no. I would be dishonest, I had no right. But Rohmer convinced me that it would lend greater ambiguity to the film if I took the role, precisely because I wasn’t a Catholic.

Imitation as it relates to authenticity; this idea appears to be the key not only to Rohmer’s moral tale or Pascal’s wager, but also structurally underlies the discussion on integral realism as a reformulation of classical mimesis.

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83 Ibid., p. 68

84 Jean-Louis Trintignant in Cottrell, Pierre and Jean Douchet. “Ma nuit chez Maud.” Télécinéma (25/02/1974) [Television interview]
As Pascal emphasizes the necessity of wagering the existence of God, so too does Bazin rule out the possibility of escaping the bet: in presence of the camera, a choice - Daney calls it a qualitative leap - has to be made. The “I know, but all the same” paradigm put forth by Daney suggests that reason is not the deciding factor in these types of bets: according to several news reports on the event, the unfortunate bird-man Reichelt had been discouraged up to the very last moment by accompanying friends, but jumped regardless of their convincing arguments: ‘On connaissait les projets de M. Reichelt, on était au courant de ses expériences et on en appréhendait pour lui les conséquences. Mais M. Reichelt restait sourd aux conseils qu’on lui donnait. Le malheureux est mort victime de sa témérité.’ As such, Pascal’s wager implies a particular inadequacy of rational arguments, as Terence Penelhum writes on the topic:

The most oft-quoted passage of Pascal is the one that says the heart has its reasons which the reason does not know. This is not, I would suggest, a simple appeal to wallow in emotionalism, but partly a way of saying that the canons of rationality of belief and unbelief are different. If the Wager argument is right, the bridge between the two can be crossed by a process which will be differently described by both sides, but which will have its rational element whichever way it is viewed.

This paradigm of infinite gain over finite loss, I will argue, accurately reflects what proves to be a pragmatic paradigm of definite choice guiding the insoluble dilemma between image and reality: we have no choice but to choose.

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88 Perhaps here Gabriel Marcel’s ontological exigence, which Dalle Vacche considers to be closely linked with Bazin’s critical work (cf. supra, 2.3 Cinematic Specificity: “the eternal dead-again of cinema”), indeed conveys cinematic specificity as a realist wager. Marcel explains: ‘Being is - or should be necessary. It is impossible that everything should be reduced to a play of successive appearances which are inconsistent with each other… or, in the words of Shakespeare, to “a tale told by an idiot.” I aspire to participate in this being, in this reality—and perhaps this aspiration is already a degree of participation, however rudimentary’
In several ways, I will argue later on, the temerity in Reichelt’s desire to overcome gravity is indispensable to understand the ways in which Bazin solidifies the invention of cinema, via the figure of Icarus, in terms of myth and imagination (cf. infra, 4.1 Icarus and the Imagination of Cinema). First, I will follow the Kierkegaardian reference suggested by Daney and argue that the principles which Bazin extracts from his work on exploration film, especially the notion of a negative imprint, formulate the core of Bazin’s realist project as a leap of faith in reality, grounded in ‘le pouvoir irrationnel de la photographie qui emporte notre croyance’.  


After Bazin and from a philosophical perspective, Gilles Deleuze has drawn parallels between cinema, Pascal and Kierkegaard, considering the latter to be ‘a precursor of the cinema’ (cited in Ronald Bogue. “To Choose to Choose - To Believe in this World.” Cinémas: Journal of Film Studies, Vol. 16, No 2-3 (2006): p. 41). Based on the same premise of exigency and choice, Deleuze calls them “tragic philosophers” (Ibid., 34): both Pascal’s wager and Kierkegaard’s leap of faith involve a definite decision at the risk of a certain loss. From this perspective, Ronald Bogue writes that ‘it comes as no surprise […] that Kierkegaard appears in both Cinema I and Cinema 2. In each volume, Kierkegaard is invoked as a guide toward an ethic of “choosing to choose” and a faith that induces “belief in this world”’ (Ibid., p. 41).

89 Bazin, “Ontologie,” p. 14